CHAPTER V

PERSONAL HYGIENE AND SANITARY HABITS

Health in general may be defined as the quality of life that enables the individual to live most and best. It is that state in which the mental and physical activities of the body are adjusted satisfactorily to the environment. It can be put to danger either by doing or by neglecting certain things. Health is capable of enrichment or deterioration. Life at its best is a more realistic concept for all purposes than the mere avoidance of disease and that the proper goal of all health teaching is the finest kind of individual living. Personal hygiene not only concerned with matters pertaining to health of a person, but also includes certain personal factors conducive to good health. The main object of personal hygiene is to maintain a high standard of health (Bedi, 1980: 214).

Some practices of the Tagins are found to be indispensably related to the seasonal as well as the cultural matrix. The natural resources that surround human habitations are agents influencing the state of fitness of a community. Use of available natural resources can be of benefit, but misuse of these will cause a number of problems of great concern.
The study of hygiene requires the understanding of individual's particular habits, which grow by practice and eventually become part of culture. (Hasan, 1967: 70). Several anthropologists and social scientists (May, 1960; Banks, 1962; Cruz-Coke, 1964; Polgar, 1964; Alland Jr., 1970; Delton, 1978; et al.) studied distribution and prevalence of diseases and their socio-cultural and environmental determinants, which have revealed that there are close relationship between human behavioural factors and transmission and prevalence of diseases. Personal hygiene and sanitation are important indicators of health status of a community. If a society maintains healthy sanitation and takes proper care of personal hygiene, there are least possibilities of suffering from different diseases. During the present study, a reasonably intensive investigation was done among the Tagins to understand their personal hygiene and sanitary habits. Data were collected through non-participant observations and interviews and an attempt has been made to collect as much data as possible. Findings have conveniently been presented in this chapter under different captions.

1. Settlement Pattern

The Tagins prefer to construct their villages on hill slopes, preferably by the side of any stream or river. The studied villages are situated on slopes in the foot of the hills and are not laid out according to definite pattern. The villages are little undulating as well as surrounded by both natural and manmade boundaries. The houses are constructed here and there without any systematic way and these houses are distributed in zigzag fashion. There is no much distance from one house to another and all the
houses are found in a cluster. The villages are medium in size with an average of 20 households. Village paths are katcha and remain muddy during rainy season. Most of the houses are thatched pile dwelling and a few are found thatched house on earthen plinth. Terraces and wet fields are just nearby the villages and jhum fields are to some extent 2 to 5 km away from the village.

Upland and scattered settlement have got many advantages in favour of health. In any upland site water carrying pollutants never get stagnant that may ultimately turn into breeding ground for many germs and germ carriers. Besides these, the upland settlement has got some other advantages. In such places, air and water, the two major disease carrying media, remain free from dusts and similar other pollutants. Likewise, settlement also has got some positive point in favour of health. In low population areas, sewage and excreta never assume a dimension that could be potent for any health hazard. Many diseases could exist only in large population and many others are communicable only from man to man. Small and scattered population automatically is safe from different diseases. Infectious disease like infantile diarrhoea, tuberculosis, syphilis, malaria and pandemic diseases like cholera, plague and typhus reached to their peak by this century. This is possibly because of the intensification of hygienic problems due to growth of compact urban settlements (Banks and Hislop, 1962:817-30).

Data on household and housing patterns show that the people by and large are probably ignorant or are not conscious of personal cleanliness and sanitary

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practices. Living conditions of the people seem to be responsible for the majority of
diseases and ailments. There is no proper drainage system in the villages. Sewage is
found to be accumulated here and there even under the dwelling houses. Utensils are
cleaned on the floor of the living house and water accumulates under it. The situation
becomes more unhygienic as the underground spaces of the dwelling houses are used
as pigsty. During day times, pigs roam here and there and almost every corner of the
surrounding area of the homesteads are found with the excreta of pigs. Stagnant water
helps mosquito breeding. Absence of any drainage system helps the germs of the
different bacterial diseases like diarrhoea, dysentery, skin diseases, etc., to multiply.
Flies, which also breed in the accumulated sewage, may carry different viruses from
sewage to food during the monsoon. They do not take measures to check their
breeding. Improper disposal of human excreta may be responsible for (a) direct
infection in man (b) the contamination of soil and (c) the possibility of disease
transference to man through the agency of insects or animals.

2. House

It has already been mentioned that the materials used for construction of
houses by the Tagins are thatch, bamboo, wooden plank, tree-trunk, cane, etc. Huts are
constructed over the piles in the hill slope. The huts are lack of windows and any other
ventilation system other than one front door and in a few cases one rear door. Inside the
house, a hearth is always kept burning, particularly during winter. The light is
insufficient inside their houses. As the hearth is constantly kept burning inside the
house, the indoor environment is always smoky. The closed structure of their huts in
the absence of ventilation also makes the internal environment stuffy. All these are not
suitable for good health. Housing environment is one of the main factors held
responsible for causing many diseases, especially, respiratory and eye related
infections. Many studies have revealed that the smoking and smoked housing
environments are positively linked with the prevalence of high incidence of respiratory
infections (Moto et al. 1977 and Yarnell et al. 1977). However, the smoke of the huts
among the Tagins keeps away the mosquitoes, the malaria carriers, as well as other
harmful jungle and household insects. Pigs are generally allowed to stay under the
dwelling houses. In some cases, pigsties are constructed separately. Pigsties are found
very much damp and dirty. They do not take any measure to clean their pigsties.
Excreta of pigs and different other dirty things such as, unconsumed food of pigs, etc,
accumulate in the pigsties which act as the suitable ground for the different germs
which further spread by rain and wind.

3. Bathing

Cleaning of the skin is of immense value in facilitating the opening of
pores of the skin. The sweat glands beneath the skin, open on external surface of the
body and these are responsible for perspiration. These glands help relieve the body of
effete matter and give a feeling of comfort to it by obtaining latent heat vaporization
from the same. Cleaning of the skin is, therefore, very important for the body (Hasan,
1967:83). There is no bathing enclosure in the study area, except in a few cases. The
people take their bath under the tap or in the stream in the open. Bathing is not found to be regular among the Tagins. The old men and women are found to take their bath and wash their cloth very rarely, while the educated folk and the school going boys and girls take their bath regularly. During winter season, bathing is found to be very rare. During that period, instead of washing the whole body, they wash their faces, hands and feet only. The frequency and regularity of bathing of the children depend on the convenience of the mother or their adult family members. In practice, however, the parents are found to be more ignorant of this. In summer season, it is found that, children remain under water tap or in the stream water for prolonged period playing with water and allowing the water after bathing to be automatically dried up on their body and hair. Garbs are put on even when their bodies are still wet. They use toilet soap in irregular intervals for bathing purpose. Irregular bathing habit may be responsible for the different skin diseases among the Tagins. Moreover, one of the causes of cold and cough, common to the children, may be due to the irregular bathing habit among the children.

4. Washing of Cloth

Washing and changing of garment is not a regular practice among the Tagins. The old people rarely change their cloth and give it up when these become rags. The educated and younger people periodically change their dress and wash their garments as per convenience. Clothes are generally washed by both men and women during bathing. Generally, the detergent soap or detergent powder is used for this
purpose. In practice, it is observed that a single item of dress is being used year after year without washing, and this happens particularly in case of old people. Layers of dirt have been found accumulated in such garments, which emit stinking odour. This practice of unhygienic clothing also may be responsible for different diseases and ailments.

5. Eating and Drinking Habit

So far as the eating habit is concerned, all the members of the family do not take meal together at a time. Generally, they take their meals twice a day, once in the dawn before going out for work, and again after dusk. Some of them take their meals thrice a day. Sometimes, they eat nearby their hearth and some times in the veranda or even in the courtyard. Washing of hands and mouth before taking meal is a rare practice. Serving food in the same plate to others without cleaning the used plate is also been found among them. In the by gone days, and in some cases present day also food are being served in a bamboo made plate, locally known as gumpok to more than one person. Usually, two persons take their food from the two sides of the plate at a time. Now a days, aluminum or stainless steel dishes are used for serving food.

The domesticated dogs are allowed to take their meal with human beings. They give food to the pet from their dishes on the floor nearby them. Sometimes, it is also seen that unconsumed foods are served to the pets in the dishes which are used by the family members. It is also found that they keep meal uncovered and usually rats and pets eat a part of the food, which is later on consumed by them without slightest
hesitation. Other than regular meal, different types of food items like roasted and boiled maize, potato, arum, etc, are consumed by them as luncheon. It is notable that roasted items are directly consumed flavoured with salt and chilli without further cleaning.

Drinking water is stored in bamboo tubes, gourd shells or aluminum containers. The people do not adopt any measures to clean the water before consumption. Tap water or spring water is consumed directly by them. A few family members drink water from a single mug during eating. Local beer or tea is taken by them in bamboo tubes or in tin-coated mugs. In some cases, steel or tumbler glass is also used for this purpose. Consumption of drinking water is minimum among the people, particularly among the males. Whenever they feel thirsty, they take country liquor in lieu of water. The country liquor is consumed by them in large scale irrespective of age and sex. During preparation of country liquor, no care is taken from the hygienic point of view. Rice or millet used for the preparation of country liquor, is generally not cleaned or washed properly. No special meal is given to the newly born baby except mother's milk. When the baby starts to grow, he/she is served rice chewed by the mother. This practice may cause different disease and ailments to the new born. Washing of mouth after taking meal is a rare practice among them. In general, it is found that the people irrespective of age and sex, spit here and there frequently. It is done inside the residential house also. This mal practice helps spreading of various germs responsible for different diseases and ailments.
6. Care of Teeth

In the bygone days, the Tagins did not use anything to clean their teeth except water to rinse the mouth. Now a days tooth pastes, tooths brush, charcoal, etc, are often used by them to clean the teeth. It is observed that old people are very much ignorant about their teeth care. Children are also not to be found habituated to clean their teeth everyday. Chewing of tobacco is found to be common, irrespective of sex. Even before reaching to the adulthood, the people become habituated in tobacco chewing. Some people are found to be taking betel leaf and betel nut. Black marks are found to be very common in their teeth. A reasonable number of the cases of toothache have been found in the study area. Habit of brushing of teeth after meal or before going to bed is not found among them.

7. Hair Care

Traditionally, the Tagins have not the practice of hair trimming. Now a days, the town dwellers in general cut their hair in irregular intervals. Women folk of the study villages allow their hair to grow long, although the younger girls prefer to cut their hair as per the modern fashion. They trimmed their hair at Daporijo market situated at a distance of 1 km. from the study villages. Hair is washed by both men and women in irregular intervals. A few old folk found to be used a mixture of ash made from dried plantain tree and a special kind of soil to clean their hair. Majority of them use detergent soap for this purpose. They purchased it from the nearby market. With regard to combing of hair, the males have been found to do it for several times in a day,
but women comb their hair only once in a day. Grown-up girls, however, comb their hair two or more times in a day. The old folk are rarely found to be comb their hair. Occurrence of lice (tak) in the hair of children and women is common among the Tagins. Besides washing of hair with detergent soap, they use very dense combs to take out lice from hair of the heads. These are then killed by placing in between teeth of lower and upper jaws. This task is generally done by women. Adult males and females and grown up boys and girls generally apply different types of oil on their hair. As the Tagins have very scanty beard and moustache, a knife is sufficient to remove them. The Tagins do not have any taboo regarding hair cutting or shaving.

8. Pairing of Nails

Trimming of nails is not done at regular intervals. Old people are not accustomed to nail trimming. Accumulation of dirt in the nails is found very common among the Tagins which may be responsible for various stomach diseases, as unwanted particles can easily get their entrance in the stomach during taking food. The young and educated generations trim their nails, whenever they find nails conspicuously long. A few children are found with long nails with accumulation of dirt, which is mainly due to the negligence and ignorance of the adult member of the family. Generally, a blade or a knife is used for trimming the nails. There is no taboo relevant to the pairing of nails in the Tagin society.

9. Sleeping Habit

Sleeping habit is an integral factor for health and diseases. The Tagins
sleep inside their dwelling houses on the floor around the hearth. Generally husband and wife sleep together even in old age. The children sleep separately. As in the same house many family units sleep together, the houses are found by and large overcrowded. Some people are found not to use mosquito nets. During winter season, they rarely use warm cloth as they get required heat from the hearth. Some people even sleep in the dirty mat of the raised floor without cleaning. During winter season, generally the hearth remain lighted for twenty four hours. Cleaning of bed sheets, pillow cover, mosquito nets, etc. is a rare practice, however, sometimes they dry these in sunshine.

10. Disposal of Sewage and Refuse

The Tagins use to clean their utensils, food items, etc., in the back veranda of their dwelling houses and allow to pass the water under the floor through the spaces of platform. There are no proper drainage systems to canalize the sewage to any definite direction. Sometime the water remain accumulated under the pile dwelling and act as favourable breeding ground for mosquitoes. Accumulation of water is found in and around the bathing place also. Regarding the disposal of household refuse, there is no any definite place. The refuse is found to be heaped here and there of the courtyard or under the dwelling houses. After a few days, these generally start decaying. It is quite likely that many kind of germs may result from this accumulated refuse

11. Pets and Hygiene

The domestication of animal has a definite role to play in
environmental situation and is an important and influential factor affecting the health of the people. A good number of diseases and ailments of men are to be caused by infections from diseased domesticated animals. Animals, therefore, assume sanitary importance, primarily as a possible source of infection. These infectious diseases are known to be transmitted to man by direct contact and by various vehicles of infection; milk, urine, excreta, hides, wool, hairs, saliva and intermediate insect host. Hence, there is no one way of preventing these animal diseases from being conveyed to the people (Hasan 1967: 70).

The Tagins domesticate animals like pig, dog, cat and mithun. To rear fowl is a common practice. Pigsty is constructed under the pile dwellings. The hens that lay eggs or incubate are kept in a basket made of bamboo and installed in the one corner of dwelling house. During day times fowls are kept free, which roam everywhere in the homestead and nearby area. Dogs and cats remain free with full freedom to move anywhere. The proximity between the man and the domestic animals is very close and often utensils are shared with them. The Tigins under study do not seem to have knowledge that many diseases and ailments are caused by the pets, and the presence of these near human beings definitely increase the chances of infection.

12. Defecation

In the by gone days, latrines and bathrooms are rarely constructed by the Tagins. One of the informant, Mr. Mania Dulom, told that their forefathers used to go to nearby jungle to attend nature’s call after which they were not habituated to clean
the affected parts of the body with water. The scenario has been slightly changed. In the study area, almost every household has pit latrine. Generally, after attending nature’s call no toilet soap is used to clean hands and feet. They use only water for this purpose. The children defecate either in the kitchen garden or in the backyard and leave night soil there which are some times eaten by domesticated pigs or dogs. Infants usually defecate on mother’s lap or on bed. Night soil is thrown to the kitchen garden or under the pile dwelling. It is pertinent to note here that except a few cases, people do not have the habit of using footwear. They go to defecate barefooted.

A number of diseases, like cholera, typhoid, fever, dysentery, diarrhoea, etc., may spread among the people because of indiscriminate defecation. The habit of going out door for defecation, with the habit of moving barefoot may be an important factor responsible for worm infestation. The eggs of worms pass out with faces, and are deposited on the soil. These may be scattered nearby the soil by rains and winds. In suitable environment, these eggs may develop into larvae. These larvae usually find their way back into the human body through the barefoot. The retention of wet soil or mud between the toes greatly favours the larvae’s entry into the human body.